

cles bulletin cles bulletin cles bulletin cles bulletin

CLÉS bulletin is a topical summary of articles which have appeared in the professional press. Its aim is to provide a pithy précis of a subject area, drawing out the specific and common issues raised in the individual articles.

CLÉS Bulletin No. 9
March 2003

Consulting communities

It has now been widely recognised among regeneration and local economic development practitioners that consulting communities is beneficial in achieving effective and sustainable regeneration.

In particular, residents' consultancy schemes are part of a wide range of activities that aim to improve local services in deprived areas and the quality of information available about running better community projects¹.

Recent research from the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) explores the potential contribution of residents' consultancy approaches and has triggered new interest in the topic of community consultation in the press.

Economic Development Today² (EDT) sets out the key findings of the DfES research, explaining that the term, 'residents' consultancy' encompasses various initiatives through which residents of areas undergoing regeneration, share or market the skills they have acquired from participation in the regeneration process. The focus of the consultancies is the promotion of good practice in community empowerment and involvement in neighbourhood renewal.

EDT tells us that the research had two main objectives:

¹ Taylor, Marilyn et al *Exploring the field of residents' consultancy*. DfES, 2002

² Wheeler, Kenneth *Residents' consultancy* Economic Development Today Issue 52 Feb 2003 p.5

- ① to increase knowledge and understanding about activities falling within the broad definition of residents' consultancy, both in the UK and overseas;
- ② to identify good practice issues in residents' consultancy and propose a framework for evaluating six pilot schemes.

EDT explains that the research indicated two primary strands of residents' consultancy:

- ① **Learning and skills transfer:** Inspiring others and transferring knowledge about how success has been achieved elsewhere and providing information and practical help in undertaking community based regeneration or setting up community projects;
- ② **Community consultation:** Creating opportunities for residents to take part in local consultation and outreach activities thus enabling community involvement. Additionally creating opportunities for training and employment, producing better local information for service providers and ensuring local voices are heard.

EDT concludes that the study has spanned a number of critical issues relating to current policy initiatives, including developing active communities and citizens, undertaking effective neighbourhood renewal, promoting quality public services and public realm, tackling unemployment and promoting social enterprise.

New Start³ magazine similarly explains that residents' consultancies focus either on transferring learning and skills to others, or on local consultation to influence service delivery. It tells us that community consultancies can range from businesses with paid staff competing for contracts to informal groupings whose work includes some consultation.

New Start sets out the potential benefits of residents' consultancies, which include:

- effective and more participatory consultation;
- improved service delivery;
- building skills;
- preventing marginalisation of local interests;
- reaching disengaged communities;
- helping create jobs and social enterprises.

New Start also identifies commonly experienced problems with funding, difficulties in understanding tenders, recruiting, retaining or replacing skilled staff, remunerating those on benefits, competition and sustainability.

³ Downer, Susan *I'd like to ask the audience* 28 Feb 2003 p.11

New Start focuses on one case study of a successful residents' consultancy in Wigan, as a good example of what can be achieved with minimal resources. The Hagfold Community Mapping Network has made tangible improvements in the area and has now launched its own community charter, enabling local people to monitor the achievement of service providers against agreed targets and hold them to account if they fail.

Regeneration and Renewal⁴ magazine suggests that the key to engaging communities is through practitioners tailoring their strategies to the particular needs of their own area, objectives and resources.

It features four case studies of successful consultation exercises – each of them quite different, yet effective in its context:

- ① the Greets Green NDC Partnership in the West Midlands has established a citizen's jury, who were asked if the plans for the area were being developed in a way that answered the community's needs. The jury made recommendations on the framework plan, with the help of a facilitator;
- ② the Rochdale SRB5 programme uses "fun and creative" open forums, rather than traditional public meetings, to attract the wide variety of residents in the area. A community forum comprises local volunteers and its representatives hold a majority on the SRB executive;
- ③ on the Anglia Estate in Sudbury the residents' association and other stakeholders were brought together to form the Anglia Estate Improvement Group (AEIG) after it became clear that the community were dissatisfied with the council doing things for them. The establishment of the AEIG gave the residents' real power and led to a refurbishment plan that was displayed at the heart of the estate.
- ④ The North Bransholme Estate in Hull has established the 'Planning for Real' system, whereby local people place cards indicating their concerns, hopes and aspirations. This is based on the principle that talking can exclude the less confident and articulate and takes away the need to stand up and speak in a meeting or fill in a questionnaire that only asks certain questions.

An article in ***Local Governance***⁵ draws upon evidence from the 2000 General Household Survey, and identifies the way in which the culture of community

engagement in deprived populations is characterised predominantly by one-to-one reciprocity rather than engagement in community-based groups, the latter being relatively more usual in affluent populations.

The article argues that the current policy approach of fostering the community sector via the 'third sector' route of developing existing community-based groups is inappropriate to deprived populations. Instead a 'fourth sector' route of further cultivating one-to-one reciprocity is advocated.

Local Governance concludes by outlining policy initiatives that could be used to implement a 'fourth sector' approach, including LETS (Local Exchange and Trading Schemes), time banks and employee mutuals.

The ultimate evaluation criteria for all of this must be results; whether better services and accountability are achieved. It is evident that residents' consultancy has a very important role and that the work carried out by them is excellent. However, it should not be seen as a panacea; for some areas and local cultures effective traditional representation may remain the most effective mechanism.

For more information on this topic, please contact:

Siân Thomas
Information & Policy Researcher, CLES

The Centre for Local Economic Strategies

Express Networks,
1 George Leigh Street,
Manchester

M4 5DL

Tel 0161 236 7036

Fax 0161 236 1891

Email sianthomas@cles.org.uk

Web <http://www.cles.org.uk>

⁴ Ross, Matt *The hearing test* *Regeneration and Renewal* 7 Feb 2003 p.19-20

⁵ Williams, Colin C *Cultures of community engagement: some policy lessons from the 2000 General Household Survey* *Local Governance* 28 (4) Winter 2000 pp.263-271